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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

14 August 1984

SUCCESSION TO KHOMEINI: IMPLICATIONS FOR IRANIAN POLICY [REDACTED]

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Summary

Ayatollah Khomeini's health is declining, although he does not now appear to be dying. The incapacitation or death of the Islamic Republic's charismatic leader would not lead to a quick unraveling of Iran's clerical regime. After nearly six years in power, the clerical network of institutions and instruments of repression are too well entrenched to wither away soon. [REDACTED]

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Ayatollah Montazeri is the most likely immediate successor to Khomeini. As long as the clerics remain in control, we expect Tehran to emphasize Islamic ideology and to be wary of close relations with either superpower. With Khomeini gone, however, Tehran would probably move gradually to disengage from the war with Iraq. Still, tension between the two historical rivals would remain high. [REDACTED]

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This paper was prepared by [REDACTED], Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, Persian Gulf Division, at the request of the Director of Central Intelligence. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Persian Gulf Division, [REDACTED]

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All leading clerical contenders for power support the export of the revolution and some terrorist activity. As a result, we would expect Iran to continue subversive activities in the Persian Gulf and to sustain efforts to undermine US interests in the Middle East even after Khomeini's death. Eventually, however, violent export of the revolution is likely to become a key issue between moderate and radical factions. [REDACTED]

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Over the longer term, there is a significant chance that competition for power among the clerics will threaten the regime's stability. There are currently no obvious alternatives to a clerical regime. A Revolutionary Guard leader who could obtain some clerical support and claim continuity with the Islamic Revolution might be able to seize power during a prolonged period of instability. Ideological hostility in the Guard makes it unlikely that such a successor regime would be pro-West. The regular military is even more closely controlled than the Guard and even less likely to take power. Neither the Shah's son nor any other Iranian exile leader possesses the necessary domestic assets to shape Iran's political future. [REDACTED]

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If Iran experienced prolonged upheaval, the Soviets would enjoy expanded opportunities for exploitation, particularly among Iran's ethnic minorities. We continue to doubt, however, that Moscow would be able to control events in Iran. Its best hope probably lies in the chance that a weakened central government in Tehran, particularly a Revolutionary Guard government, would look to Moscow for support and assistance. [REDACTED]

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Khomeini's Deteriorating Health

[REDACTED] reporting from US embassies indicate that Khomeini has suffered at least two minor heart attacks and/or strokes since the middle of June, but these apparently have caused no permanent damage.

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Succession Mechanics

The Islamic Republic's constitution mandates that the succession to Khomeini's post as supreme political-religious authority be formally decided by a cleric-dominated, 60-man Assembly of Experts in religious law. The constitution allows a choice between a single heir or a leadership council of three or five top level clerics. Since Khomeini's recent illnesses, leading Iranian clerics have intensified efforts to prepare for Khomeini's succession while trying to avoid any public signs of urgency. In late July, for example, a subcommittee of clerics from the Assembly of Experts was named to define in detail the succession process. []

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If Khomeini were to die suddenly, a quick decision to tap Ayatollah Hosein Montazeri is likely. He has long been considered Khomeini's preferred choice as heir, and such a move would provide a visible sign of continuity. Majles Speaker Rafsanjani, second only to Khomeini in political power, endorsed Montazeri last month, and the government-controlled press now refers to Montazeri as a "Grand Ayatollah" in an effort to raise his religious standing. There are only around a half dozen other such senior clerics in Iran, including Khomeini. []

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Montazeri, who for years has acted as Khomeini's de facto deputy on a variety of important matters, has a reputation as a hardliner on the war and on the strict observance of Islamic law. In recent weeks, however, he has softened his public positions on such issues as the war and social policy, suggesting that he is trying to broaden his political base. Montazeri is about 60 years old. He was tortured while in jail under the Shah, weakening his health, but he is not known to have any life-threatening illnesses. []

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The Struggle for Power

Clerical infighting would not end with Montazeri's succession to Khomeini's position. Montazeri lacks Khomeini's religious stature and charisma. []

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We expect that clerics who now control competing governmental, religious, and revolutionary organizations will continue to fight for political power, even though Montazeri will have titular authority. Clerical politics in Iran are best understood by viewing the clergy as roughly divided into three groups along an ideological continuum. At one extreme are activists who advocate strict clerical supervision of society under the leadership of one supreme religious jurisprudent. In the middle are clerical moderates who argue for only generalized clerical supervision, with less direct intervention in the government. At the other extreme are quietists who oppose any clerical involvement in politics--and, hence, the whole structure of Khomeini's Islamic Republic. Although this group represents the traditional Shia view and, [] may have the largest number of adherents in Iran, its philosophy has kept it largely on the sidelines under Khomeini. []

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Among the key players maneuvering against this ideological backdrop will be:

- Majles Speaker Rafsanjani, a junior cleric in his 40s who is skillful at maneuvering among the various clerical factions. Pragmatic on many issues, he is a firm believer in tight clerical control. He is often reported to be a rival of President Khamenei.
- President Khamenei, another relatively young cleric who reportedly is a less adroit politician than Rafsanjani, but is a charismatic speaker. Khamenei also supports tight clerical supervision.
- Ayatollah Meshkini, a slightly older cleric, teaches in Qom. He shares some of the powers Khomeini delegated to Montazeri. A clerical activist, he also falls at the extreme end of the continuum. He is anti-Soviet, a hawk on the war, and favors land reform.
- Ayatollah Mahdavi-Kani, a cleric in his fifties, is a former Prime Minister who now heads the Tehran Militant Clerics' Association. He has been identified with clerical moderates on most issues and falls in the middle of the continuum.
- Ayatollah Musavi-Ardabili, also in his fifties, is head of the Iranian judiciary. He has emerged over the past year as an advocate of political and economic reform, probably placing him toward the center of the continuum.
- The half-dozen other "Grand" Ayatollahs, such as Ayatollah Shariat-Madari, spiritual leader of Iran's Turkic speaking minority. All of these senior clerics are in their eighties or nineties and all are theoretically Khomeini's religious equals. Their opposition to Khomeini's ideas and programs place them and their many supporters at the opposite end of the continuum from Khomeini.

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Short-Term Policy Implications

We expect competition among these individuals and their allies to increase as each attempts to impose his writ on Iranian politics. This struggle will affect both Iran's domestic and foreign policies as they are used as weapons for and against individuals vying for power.

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Khomeini, Ruhollah
Leader of the Islamic Republic; outranks all other officials; commander in chief of the armed forces.



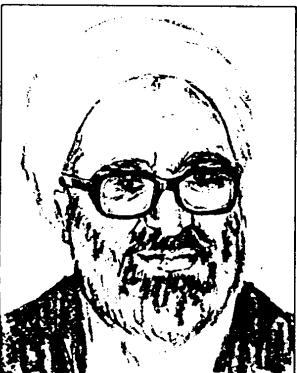
Hashemi-Rafsanjani, Ali Akbar
(Cleric) 40s
Speaker of the Majles (Assembly) and a founder of and deputy head of the Islamic Republic Party (IRP); spokesman of the Supreme Defense Council; has ties to the Revolutionary Guard; often disagrees with President Khamenei.



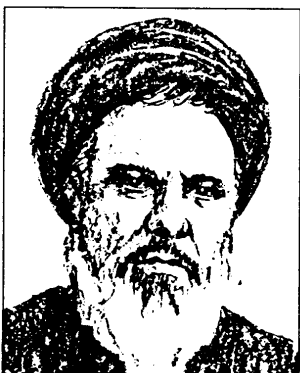
Khamenei, Ali
(Cleric) 40s
President; a founder of and secretary general of the IRP; chairman of the Supreme Defense Council; Friday prayer leader of Tehran, but has spoken rarely since being seriously wounded in June 1981; has ties to the Revolutionary Guard; often disagrees with Speaker Rafsanjani.



Mahdavi-Kani, Mohammad
(Cleric) 50s
Head of the Tehran militant clerics society; member of the Council of Guardians; acting prime minister in fall 1981; Interior Minister 1980 to 1981; has ties to the Revolutionary Guard, Komiteh system, and Revolutionary Courts, and has been critical of radical proposals.



Montazeri Hussein Ali
(Cleric) about 60
Former Friday prayer leader of Tehran and Qom; delegated by Khomeini the authority to select candidates for the Supreme Judicial Council and to name Revolutionary Court judges; supervises Revolutionary Guard ideological training; close ties to radical Arab states, especially Libya; in poor health; leading candidate to succeed Khomeini.



Musavi-Ardabili, Abdol Karim
(Cleric) 50s
Head of Supreme Judicial Council and a founder of the IRP; appears strongly antileftist; may have a special interest in economic issues; shares with Prime Minister responsibility for implementation of Khomeini's December 1982 "liberalization" decrees; prefers to avoid public involvement in controversial matters.



Musavi-Khamenei, Mir Hussein
(Layman) about 40
Prime Minister and former member of IRP central committee; former editor of IRP newspaper; may be related to President Khamenei; shares with Ardabili responsibility for implementation of Khomeini's December 1982 "liberalization" decrees.



Meshkini, Ali
(Cleric) 40s or 50s
Friday prayer leader of Qom and head of Qom militant clerics society; shares with Montazeri authority from Khomeini to name Revolutionary Court judges; a drafter of land reform legislation; supervises selection of weekly sermon topics for nationwide use.

Still, the path toward an end to the war is likely to be lengthy and tortuous. Khomeini's clear identification with its continuation and with the demand to oust Iraqi President Saddam Husayn probably will require his heirs to allow some time to pass before they feel able to maneuver. His death, moreover, would deprive them of the one person with the stature to bless a compromise solution. Although concerned about war weariness, the regime would also fear that ending the war short of victory would call into question Tehran's claim of religious invincibility. []

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Whatever the eventual outcome, the long term geopolitical struggle between Iran and Iraq will continue. Moreover, should the Iranian succession degenerate into open factional fighting, Baghdad is likely to provide clandestine support to one of the factions in the effort to mold the outcome in its favor. []

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The Superpowers. Relations with both superpowers are unlikely to improve anytime soon. Political rivals will seek to discredit proponents of such moves, and the image of the US "satan" will be too important a symbol of continuity with Khomeini's legacy to allow any quick improvement in relations. Moscow also will be unable to make rapid political gains--most clerics are deeply suspicious of the USSR and hostile to Communist ideology. Moscow's military support to Baghdad, moreover, represents another serious constraint. On the other hand, there appears to be a consensus for continuing to improve relations with other industrialized countries, such as West Germany and Japan, whose products and expertise are essential to the sustaining of the Iranian economy. []

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Terrorism. There is also a wide clerical consensus on the "export of the revolution." Most prominent clerics--particularly Ayatollah Montazeri--have been associated with some terrorist activity. Montazeri also has been an advocate of close Iranian ties with Libya. If the struggle for power coalesces around moderate and radical factions, Iranian support for subversion and terrorism are likely to be key issues of dispute. []

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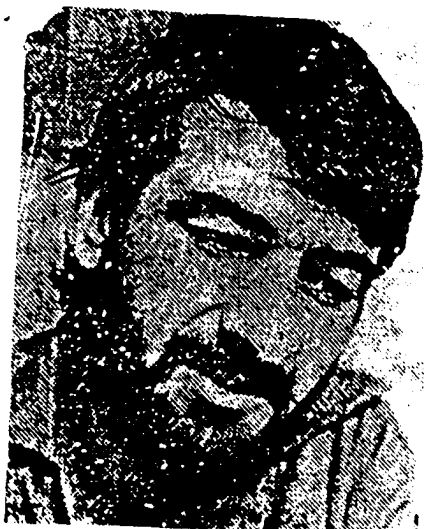
Economy. Clerical infighting probably will cause Iran's already serious economic problems to worsen. Disputes between activists pushing for strong central control, and conservatives who favor decentralization and private enterprise, have so far hampered implementation of any coherent economic development strategy. We doubt either group soon will become strong enough to impose its views on the other, and Iran's economy will continue to stagnate, leading to additional social unrest. []

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The Longer Term

Over the longer term, Iran's political future remains clouded. At a minimum, however, it is clear that without Khomeini, no one will have the stature to cap clerical infighting. If this competition does get out of hand, clerics with close ties to various elements within the regular military and the Revolutionary Guard may seek their aid, raising the prospects for civil war, anarchy, and the disintegration of Iran. []

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Moshen Rezai

Commander
of the
Revolutionary Guard

Appointed to post in 1982... often clashes with Army commander Shirazi over conduct of the war... conflicts with Guard Minister Rafiqdust and Majlis Speaker Rafsanjani... considered pro-Soviet... may have been wounded in early 1984.



Mohsen Rafiqdust

Minister
of the
Revolution Guards

In his mid 40s... former street tough... described as clever but brash... involved in the execution of officers loyal to the Shah... appointed as Minister in October 1982... uneven relations with Rezai



General Qasim Ali Zahirnejad

Chief
Joint Armed Forces Staff

In his late 50s... retired by the Shah but reappointed by clerics... crushed Kurdish rebellion before the war... helped rally Iranian troops in Khuzestan after Iraqi invasion... former commander of the ground forces... opposes Ground Forces Commander Shirazi on continuing large scale attacks into Iraq.



Colonel Sayyed Shirazi

Commander
Iranian Ground Forces

In his mid 30s... very religious... served as an artillery officer under Shah... ruthlessly crushed Kurdish rebellion in early 1980... succeeded Zahirnejad as ground forces commander in late 1981... supports merging of the regular forces with the

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[redacted]

If a post-Khomeini Islamic regime does fall, we believe the most likely successor would eventually emerge from the military, with some clerical backing. Either or both the Army and the Revolutionary Guard could be involved, but the Guard is more likely to play a decisive role. Given the purges within the regular military and the ideological hostility to the West in the Guard, we doubt that any such coalition would be pro-West. It would more likely espouse nonalignment and for some time be inward looking, attempting to consolidate firm control. [redacted]

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A prolonged period of upheaval would provide the Soviets with greatly expanded opportunities in Iran, especially among Iran's ethnic minorities along their common border. We believe, however, that the Soviets' ability to influence events in Iran would be limited--many of their assets were wrapped up following crackdowns on the Tudeh party and the Mujahedin, and their willingness to act boldly will be restrained by their experience in Afghanistan and by the possibility of superpower confrontation. [redacted]

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The Soviets are likely to court the new regime while covertly building their assets. They probably will hope that a weakened government in Tehran would seek Moscow's support and assistance, providing the USSR with direct access. This most likely would occur if a Revolutionary Guard leader assumed control with the assistance of left-leaning lay Islamic technocrats. Such a regime might be tempted to look to the Soviets for both military and economic assistance. Alternatively, Iranian leaders in a weakened post-Khomeini regime might fear that the Soviets would take actions along their common border or in Iraq or Afghanistan that would threaten Iran, and as a result could be accomodating to Moscow. [redacted]

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